

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a beautiful maiden named Medusa. Medusa lived in the city of Athens in a country named Greece—and although there were many pretty girls in the city, Medusa was considered the most lovely.

Unfortunately, Medusa was very proud of her beauty and thought or spoke of little else. Each day she boasted of how pretty she was, and each day her boasts became more outrageous.

On and on Medusa went about her beauty to anyone and everyone who stopped long enough to hear her—until one day when she made her first visit to the Parthenon with her friends. The Parthenon was the largest temple to the goddess Athena in all the land. It was decorated with amazing sculptures and paintings. Everyone who entered was awed by the beauty of the place and couldn't help thinking how grateful they were to Athena, goddess of wisdom, for inspiring them and for watching over their city of Athens. Everyone, that is, except Medusa.

When Medusa saw the sculptures, she whispered that she would have made a much better subject for the sculptor than Athena had. When Medusa saw the artwork, she commented that the artist had done a fine job considering the goddess's thick eyebrows—but imagine how much more wonderful the painting would be if it was of someone as delicate as Medusa.

And when Medusa reached the altar, she sighed happily and said, “My, this is a beautiful temple. It is a shame it was wasted on Athena, for I am so much prettier than she is—perhaps someday people will build an even grander temple to my beauty.”

Medusa's friends grew pale. The priestesses who overheard Medusa gasped. Whispers ran through all the people in the temple, who quickly began to leave—for everyone knew that Athena enjoyed watching over the people of Athens and feared what might happen if the goddess had overheard Medusa's rash remarks.

Before long the temple was empty of everyone except Medusa, who was so busy gazing proudly at her reflection in the large bronze doors that she hadn't noticed the swift departure of everyone else. The image she was gazing at wavered and suddenly, instead of her own features, it was the face of Athena that Medusa saw reflected back at her.

“Vain and foolish girl,” Athena said angrily. “You think you are prettier than I am! I doubt it to be true, but even if it were—there is more to life than beauty alone. While others work and play and learn, you do little but boast and admire yourself.”

“Nonsense,” Athena retorted. “Beauty fades swiftly in all mortals. It does not comfort the sick, teach the unskilled, or feed the hungry. And by my powers, your loveliness shall be stripped away completely. Your fate shall serve as a reminder to others to control their pride.”

And with those words, Medusa's face changed to that of a hideous monster. Her hair twisted and thickened into horrible snakes that hissed and fought one another atop her head.

And with that, Athena sent Medusa with her hair of snakes to live with the blind monsters—the gorgon sisters—at the ends of the earth, so that no innocents would be accidentally turned to stone at the sight of her.

Adapted from: Berens, E. M. “Moiræ or Fates (Parcæ)”. *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome*. New York: Maynard, Merrill and Co., 1894. 139–141. Web. 7 June 2013. Public domain.

Prince Theseus was greatly loved by his father, King Egeus. Theseus, however, was much too brave and active a young man to spend all his time talking about the past with his father. His ambition was to perform other, more heroic deeds.

One morning, Prince Theseus awoke to sobs and screams of woe—from the king’s palace, from the streets, and from the temples. He put on his clothes as quickly as he could and, hastening to the king, inquired what it all meant.

“Alas!” quoth King Egeus. “This is the saddest anniversary of the year. It is the day when we draw lots to see which of the youths and maidens of Athens shall go to be devoured by the horrible Minotaur!”

“The Minotaur!” exclaimed Prince Theseus; and, like a brave young prince as he was, he put his hand to the hilt of his sword. “What kind of a monster may that be? Is it not possible to slay him?”

But King Egeus shook his head and explained. In the island of Crete there lived a dreadful monster, called a Minotaur, shaped partly like a man and partly like a bull. But King Minos of Crete built a habitation for the Minotaur and took care of his health and comfort. A few years before, there had been a war between the city of Athens and the island of Crete, in which the Athenians were beaten. They could only beg for peace if they agreed to seven young men and seven maidens, every year, to be devoured by the pet monster of the cruel King Minos.

When Theseus heard the story, he said, “Let the people of Athens this year draw lots for only six young men, instead of seven. I will myself be the seventh; and let the Minotaur devour me if he can!”

As Prince Theseus was going on board, his father said, “My beloved son, observe that the sails of this vessel are black, since it goes upon a voyage of sorrow and despair. I do not know whether I can survive till the vessel returns. But as long as I do live, I shall creep daily to the top of yonder cliff, to watch if there be a sail upon the sea. And if by some happy chance you should escape the jaws of the Minotaur, then tear down those dismal sails, and hoist others that shall be bright as the sunshine. When I see the white sails, I and all the people will know that you are coming back victorious.”

Theseus promised that he would do so. Then he set sail, and eventually arrived at King Minos’ kingdom. The guards of King Minos came down to the waterside and took charge of the 14 young men and damsels. Theseus and his companions were led to the king’s palace.

When King Minos saw Theseus, the king looked at him more attentively, because his face was calm and grave. “Young man,” asked he, with his stern voice, “are you not appalled at the certainty of being devoured by this terrible Minotaur?”

“I have offered my life in a good cause,” answered Theseus, “and therefore I give it freely and gladly. But thou, King Minos, aren’t you appalled to do this dreadful wrong? Thou art a more hideous monster than the Minotaur himself!”

“Aha! do you think me so?” cried the king, laughing in his cruel way. “Tomorrow you shall have an opportunity of judging which is the greater monster, the Minotaur or the king!”

Near the king’s throne stood his daughter Ariadne. She was a beautiful maiden who looked at these poor doomed captives with very different feelings from those of the iron-breasted King Minos. She begged her father to set them free.

“Peace, foolish girl!” answered King Minos. He would not hear another word in their favor. The prisoners were led away to a dungeon. The seven maidens and six young men soon sobbed themselves to slumber. But Theseus was not like them. He felt that he had the responsibility of all their lives upon him, and must consider whether there was a way to save them.

Just before midnight, the gentle Ariadne showed herself. “Are you awake, Prince Theseus?” she whispered. She invited him to follow her. Ariadne led him from the prison into the pleasant moonlight.

She told him he could sail away to Athens. “No,” answered the young man; “I will never leave Crete unless I can slay the Minotaur and save my poor companions.”

“I knew you would say that,” said Ariadne. “Come with me. Here is your own sword. You will need it.”

She led Theseus to a dark grove. Ariadne pressed her finger against a block of marble in a wall that yielded to her touch, disclosing an entrance just wide enough to admit them. She said, “In the center of this labyrinth is the Minotaur, and, Theseus, you must go thither to seek him.”

They heard a roar that resembled the lowing of a fierce bull, yet had a sort of human voice. “That is the Minotaur’s noise,” whispered Ariadne. “Follow that sound through the labyrinth and you will find him. Take the end of this silken string; I will hold the other end; and then, if you win the victory, it will lead you again to this spot.”

So he took the end of the string in his left hand and his gold-hilted sword, ready drawn, in the other, and trod boldly into the labyrinth. Finally, at the center of the labyrinth, he saw the hideous creature. Sure enough, what an ugly monster it was! Only his horned head belonged to a bull; and yet, somehow, he looked like a bull all over. Theseus hated him but also felt pity. The monster let out a roar; Theseus understood that the Minotaur was saying to himself how miserable he was.

Was Theseus afraid? No! It strengthened his heart to feel a twitch at the silken cord, which he was still holding in his left hand. It was as if Ariadne were giving him all her might and courage.

Now the Minotaur caught sight of Theseus and instantly lowered his sharp horns, exactly as a mad bull does when he means to rush against an enemy. They began an awful fight. At last, the Minotaur made a run at Theseus, grazed his left side with his horn, and flung him down; and thinking that he had stabbed him to the heart, he cut a great caper in the air, opened his bull mouth from ear to ear, and prepared to snap his head off. But Theseus had leaped up and caught the monster off guard. He hit him upon the neck and made his bull head skip six yards from his human body, which fell down flat upon the ground.

So now the battle was ended. Theseus, as he leaned on his sword, taking breath, felt another twitch of the silken cord. Eager to let Ariadne know of his success, he followed the guidance of the thread and soon found himself at the entrance of the labyrinth.

“Thou hast slain the monster!” cried Ariadne, clasping her hands.

“Thanks to thee, dear Ariadne,” answered Theseus, “I return victorious.”

“Then,” said Ariadne, “we must quickly summon thy friends, and get them and thyself on board the vessel before dawn. If morning finds thee here, my father will avenge the Minotaur.”

The poor captives were awakened and told of what Theseus had done, and that they must set sail for Athens before daybreak. Prince Theseus lingered, asking Adriane to come with him. But the maiden said no. “My father is old, and has nobody but myself to love him.”



So he said farewell to Ariadne and set sail with the others. On the homeward voyage, the 14 youths and damsels were in excellent spirits. But then happened a sad misfortune.

You will remember that Theseus' father, King Egeus, had said to hoist sunshiny sails, instead of black ones, in case Theseus should overcome the Minotaur and return victorious. In the joy of their success, however, they never thought about whether their sails were black, white, or rainbow-colored. Thus the vessel returned, like a raven, with the same sable wings that had wafted her away.

Poor King Egeus, day after day, infirm as he was, had clambered to the summit of a cliff that overhung the sea, and there sat watching for Prince Theseus, homeward bound; and no sooner did he behold the fatal blackness of the sails than he concluded that his dear son had been eaten by the Minotaur. He could not bear the thought of living any longer; so he stooped forward and fell headlong over the cliff, and was drowned, poor soul, in the waves that foamed at its base.

This was melancholy news for Prince Theseus, who, when he stepped ashore, found himself king of all the country. However, he sent for his dear mother, and, by taking her advice in matters of state, became a very excellent monarch, and was greatly beloved by his people.

Adapted from: Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Theseus Goes to Slay the Minotaur" and "Theseus and Ariadne." In Storr, Francis, ed. *Half a Hundred Hero Tales of Ulysses and the Men of Old*. New York: Henry Holt, 1911. 138-153. Web. 7 June 2013. Public domain.